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ABSTRACT

The point is made that teacher educators must not be categorically included or excluded from teacher center activities, but should be considered on the basis of their personal worth and their individual teaching and/or research competencies. Stronger links are needed between the educational research community, as well as the research on teaching community, and teacher centers. Individual teachers and teacher educators can provide the means for this critical cooperation. Although stress is likely to be encountered by teachers and particularly teacher educators attempting to assume the linking role, the transition is not only possible but is essential for the improved reception of educational research into the teaching community via the teacher center. (LH)

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Occasional Paper No. 23

TEACHER CENTERS:

THE NEW MARKETPLACE FOR TEACHER EDUCATORS?

A RESOUNDING MAYBE!

Lawrence W. Lezotte

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Teacher Centers: The New Marketplace for Teacher Educators? A Resounding Maybe![1]

Lawrence W. Lezotte[2]

As I was gathering background material for this paper, I mentioned its title to one of my friends. I will recount my exchange with him, for it reveals the fundamental confusion surrounding the issue of teacher centers as the new marketplace for teacher educators.

He asked me if he was correct in assuming that teacher centers were for teachers. I assured him that they were. He then asked me if he was correct in assuming that teacher educators were themselves first and foremost teachers. I again answered in the affirmative. He then hastily concluded that if teacher centers are for teachers and teacher educators are themselves teachers, then it logically followed that teacher centers are for teacher educators. I immediately recognized that I could not fault his conclusion once I granted him the earlier premises.

I quickly attempted to add a significant qualification to the discussion, telling him that teacher educators were a special type of teacher because their students were themselves teachers or aspiring teachers. This new information prompted him to ask whether teachers learn from other teachers. Not learning from the first exchange, I promptly responded that teachers learn from other teachers all the time. He then asked whether it would be fair to describe the teacher who learns from another teacher

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[1] A symposium presented at the American Educational Research Association Meeting, San Francisco, 1979.

[2] Lawrence Lezotte is an MSU professor of educational psychology and coordinator of IRT's Communication and Dissemination Unit.

as a student and the teacher providing the new knowledge, information or insight as a teacher educator? Recognizing that another of his logical traps might lie ahead, I reluctantly said that his descriptions were probably fair. He then sprung his trap by concluding that if all teachers, at one time or another, play the role of teacher educator, and teacher centers are for teachers but not teacher educators, then teacher centers exist to serve no one since there are no teachers who are not also teacher educators.

In a desperate attempt to help my friend gain a more realistic understanding of teacher centers, I redirected our conversation to the question of their intended purpose. I told him teacher centers are designed to provide programs and experiences that will enhance teachers' instructional effectiveness in the classroom. My friend then asked simply, "Are teacher educators interested in improving their instructional effectiveness?" Even as the exceptions flashed through my mind, I responded by saying that I thought most teacher educators were. He then asked whether the instructional problems and self-devised solutions likely to be described by teachers represented the kind of information that could be valuable to teacher educators as they seek to improve their instructional effectiveness. I indicated my belief that teachers represent an invaluable source of information and insight for teacher educators. He answered that, to the extent that teachers discuss and share their problems and solutions with others in teacher centers, teacher educators would be denied a source of rich and valuable information if they were discouraged from interacting with teachers who participated in teacher centers.

Fortunately, our topic of conversation changed at that point, and I must say that I am grateful that this paper is intended for an audience of educators who, unlike my friend, "understand" the question implied by

the title.

In this paper I will argued that: (1) teacher center programs and services would be enhanced if they were linked to the educational research community generally and the research on teaching community specifically, and (2) this linking function can be provided by individuals -- some of whom may be teachers educators -- who possess and exhibit appropriate attitudes and behaviors prerequisite to effective teacher-researcher collaboration.

Let me indicate at the outset that I am well aware that many schools and colleges of education are currently experiencing a serious problem of declining enrollments in their teacher preparation programs. As a result, many of these institutions find themselves with large numbers of under-used tenured faculty members. While I hope to show that some of these individuals can find new and meaningful roles linking institutions of higher education with teacher centers, I am not trying to solve the surplus faculty problem at the expense of the evolving teacher centers program.

While I'm not approaching this topic from the point of view of a salvage operation for teacher educators, I must admit that my perspective on the topic has been significantly influenced by my past experiences in working with both teachers and teacher educators and my institutional affiliation. As a faculty member of Michigan State University's College of Education, one of the nation's largest teacher preparation institutions, I find myself in one of the largest teacher educator communities. This community, in my opinion, consists of individuals who exemplify the "best" and perhaps the "worst" of teacher educators. I feel confident in saying that the effectiveness of teacher centers would be diminished if some of my colleagues -- the best examples -- were discouraged from participating in teacher center programs simply because they are higher

education-based teacher educators. I feel equally confident in saying that the effectiveness of teacher centers also would be diminished if some of my colleagues -- the poorer examples -- were permitted or, even worse, expected to participate in teacher center programs simply because they were members of a higher education-based teacher education community and perhaps in search of a work assignment. My point here is that teacher center policies relative to the involvement of teacher educators should not deal categorically with teacher educators. The teacher center staff should seek to identify attitudes and behaviors they believe are prerequisite to useful and productive participation and actively seek out those teacher educators who possess these qualities and encourage their active and sustained involvement. Some of these prerequisite attitudes and behavioral qualities will be described later in this paper.

My perspective has also been significantly influenced by a second contextual factor -- my involvement in the Institute for Research on Teaching (IRT) at Michigan State University. The Institute, established in 1976 under a major grant from the National Institute of Education, has organized itself in such a way that (1) teachers have had a major voice in helping to determine research priorities, and (2) the disseminations efforts of the IRT reflect a desire to communicate research findings to the teacher community in a meaningful form. Based on IRT's relatively brief history and limited experiences, we have affirmed our belief that the continued effectiveness of our programs of research can and will be maintained only if we are able to maintain the high levels of teacher-researcher collaboration we have experienced to this point. I believe that the same sort of collaboration would have a significant impact on teachers participating in teacher centers for the purpose of improving their teaching effectiveness.

Members of the IRT have struggled to maintain open two-way communication between researchers and teachers. This sometimes poses a serious dilemma, however. On the one hand, researchers seek to complete their work as quickly as possible. On the other hand, the quality and relevance of their research is enhanced if teachers are involved as collaborators. Unfortunately, it seems that such collaboration, while valuable, can slow the research process. I believe that teachers educators could fill the gap and effectively serve as the linking agent, thus insuring that our goal of maintaining an open two-way communication system is realized.

Linking Knowledge Users with Knowledge Producers

Research and teaching communities must be linked. If they are not, I fear they will retreat to a level of parochialism that would be embarassing and counterproductive to them both.

This statement is strengthened by an analogy drawn from another industry and, to some extent an earlier time. I believe a parallel exists between the educational and the agricultural industries because many of the systematic problems I am discussing are similar to those previously encountered in agriculture. Most land-grant institutions, including Michigan State University, have faced the problem of linking knowledge-producing units (agricultural experiment stations) with knowledge users (farmers and farming communities). Extension programs have proven to be extremely successful in bridging across these two worlds.

To develop the parallels between agriculture and education, I have listed the various components of the two systems.

Agricultural Industry	Educational Industry
Farmers	Teachers
County Office	Teacher Centers
Agricultural Experiment Stations	Educational Research Institutions
Cooperative Extension Agent	?

There are a number of parallels between the two fields which add credibility to the argument and analogy. A few of them are highlighted below:

1. The individual farmer was free to use or not use the county office as a source of information regarding farming problems generally and his problems specifically; teachers are free to use or not use teacher centers.

2. The success and credibility of the county office were dependent on its ability to effectively respond to the needs, problems and concerns of the individual farmer; the success and credibility of teacher centers depend on their ability to effectively respond to teachers.

3. The county office became a place where farmers gathered, shared problems and solutions, helped each other and learned from each other; teacher centers can become gathering places for teachers.

4. The county agent's office became a crucial nexus where individual farmers' problems were recognized as general farming community problems and where new agricultural technologies were adapted to the unique needs of the farmers and farming community served by that office; a teacher center can become a crucial nexus for teachers.

5. The agricultural extension agency was responsible for conveying farmers' problems to the experiment stations where they could be researched and, hopefully, answers could be found; teacher centers could convey teachers' problems to educational research institutions.

6. Like the agricultural experiment station, the educational research institutions must accept the problems, needs, and concerns that flow to them from the teaching community as legitimate and be about the business of devoting research time and effort to these concerns.

7. Like the agricultural industry, education needs its own version of the cooperative extension agent to provide that critical linkage between the research institutions and the teaching constituency.

If the point of view illustrated by examining the parallels in the analogy is accepted, two questions remain: (1) Who can and should play the linking role? and (2) What qualifications and qualities are required to successfully develop that role?

Who Can and Should Play the Linking Role?

Who can play the linking role between the teacher centers and the research and development institutions? It would seem that the individuals designated to link these two components of the overall system could come from institutions of higher education, the teaching ranks, or elsewhere. Teacher center staff members might be interested in the role and, if given the opportunity, would perform well. Similarly, I believe some teacher educators have already served in the linking role between teachers, researchers, and developers and have shown themselves willing and able to meet this crucial responsibility.

From my perspective, the linking agent's place of origin is not as critical as the individual's ability to establish and maintain credibility and membership in both settings. That individual must demonstrate that s/he can communicate effectively with teachers and researchers. This competency is relatively rare. Nevertheless, if we can agree that it would be desirable to have such individuals in the overall system, then I think individuals can be found who already have these skills or could develop them. For example, the teacher collaborators who have worked at the IRT have established the ability to communicate effectively with both teachers and researchers. Similarly, I believe some of the research-oriented teacher educators who have been involved

in experiential teacher education programs such as Teacher Corps also have the skills and competencies called for here.

Both teacher educators and classroom teachers would experience some adjustment problems if they chose to make the transition from the teaching role to the linking role. While I'm not prepared to discuss the type of transition problems that would be experienced by classroom teachers, I can anticipate stress points that would be experienced by teacher educators.

1. As faculty members, teacher educators have tended to function autonomously and individually, and the linking role would require individuals to work collaboratively with others. For some, such conditions would be difficult if not traumatic.

2. Traditionally, teacher educators have had a power relationship with their students. They have been able to make demands on students and evaluate their performances. The linking role would be stripped of this power, and the individuals would not be able to make such demands on the constituency. For some teacher educators, the removal of these elements of power would provoke tremendous anxiety.

3. Teacher educators traditionally work with groups of students in organized classes that have specified goals, objectives, assignments, etc. In many instances the linking agent would be working with individuals, not groups, and would not have the certainty that comes with formal class specifications. Many teacher educators would not be comfortable in one-to-one relationships which are as open ended as that between teachers and the linking agent.

4. Teacher educators tend to deal in content which is generally abstract and rather theoretical. The linking agent would be expected to deal with content and problems that are concrete, specific, and probably atheoretical. Many teacher educators would have great difficulty in making this essential transition and translation. A similar problem would likely be encountered when teacher educators communicate with researchers, who have their own language.

Looking at these four stress factors, it may be tempting to conclude that teacher educators, and perhaps teachers, would find these transitions insurmountable. However, there are individuals who, for whatever reasons, are extremely successful at playing the linking role. Since I believe the role is essential, I would strongly recommend that educators seek

out these individuals and strive to understand how they are able to perform this difficult task.

Qualifications and Qualities of an Effective Linking Agent

What qualifications or qualities are required of someone playing the linking role? I have already mentioned a few: the ability to communicate effectively with both teachers and researchers, and the ability to establish and maintain credibility with both groups.

Other special qualities would include the capacity to see both teachers and researchers as colleagues. The collegial and collaborative relationship is the essential base on which effective two-way communication can be built. Without it, true open, two-way communication will not occur.

The linking agent must be a good listener, willing to listen to teachers and able to encourage them to elaborate on their problems, needs, and professional role and responsibilities in a non-threatening manner. Similarly, a linking agent must be able to listen to researchers and help them communicate research products and problems in ways meaningful to teachers.

A linking agent must believe that teachers' needs and concerns are real and legitimate and that researchers ought to effectively address these needs and concerns in their research program. A linking agent must be able to persuade teachers that research findings may be useful to them and worthy of their consideration. In this sense, the linking agent must be a bit of a salesman, selling teacher problems and needs to researchers, and selling research findings to teachers. This salesman role should not be interpreted to mean that a linking agent can or should engage in hard sell tactics. Such strategies would prove to be counter-productive and would surely undermine the linking agent's credibility with both teachers and researchers.

Summary

I have made several points relative to the question of whether teacher centers can or should represent a new marketplace for teacher educators. The main points of my position are:

1. As a category of individuals, university- or college-based teacher educators should be neither categorically included or excluded from teacher center activities. Teacher educators who demonstrate certain qualities and competencies should be encouraged to participate because they can and would make a significant contribution to teacher center programs.

2. The educational research community generally, and the research on teaching community specifically, must be linked with teacher centers. The absence of such a linkage will diminish the effectiveness of both communities.

3. Some teacher educators and teachers can provide this critical linkage between the two communities. The qualities and competencies prerequisite to success as a linking agent are at least partially known and others can be explicated with further study and cross-community dialogue.

4. Teacher educators, because of their traditional modes of behavior, are likely to experience stress as they attempt to make the transition from a traditional teacher educator role to the "linking agent" role I have described.

5. While stresses and strains are likely to be encountered by both teachers and teacher educators as they assume the role of a linking agent, the transition can be made.

In sum, I believe teacher centers represent a unique and exciting opportunity for researchers and teachers to collaboratively work to enhance the instructional opportunities available to all who participate in the education enterprise.

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